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# A Letter

TO THE

LORD BISHOP OF MANCHESTER,

ON

THE UTILITY OF CHURCHES.

BY

HUGH BIRLEY.

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“GO OUT QUICKLY INTO THE STREETS AND LANES OF THE CITY.”

“GO OUT INTO THE HIGHWAYS AND HEDGES, AND COMPEL THEM TO  
COME IN, THAT MY HOUSE MAY BE FILLED.”—*Luke* xiv. 21, 23.

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MANCHESTER:

THOS. ROWORTH, 21, ST. ANN'S SQUARE.

1880.



## A LETTER TO THE LORD BISHOP OF MANCHESTER.

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MY DEAR LORD BISHOP,

**A**LIIENATED households and deserted churches ! This is the gloomy picture presented to the clergy of the diocese in your recent Visitation Charge, and confirmed by detailed and authentic statistics, of which the substantial accuracy can scarcely be questioned.

The subject is by no means new, but perhaps it has never been set forth more emphatically, or with more authority.

At the present moment this desolate aspect of his spiritual charge (a million souls in Eastern London) is oppressing the mind, and the solution of the overwhelming problem, Where can a remedy be found ? is taxing the energies of the Bishop of Bedford.

Seventeen years ago, at the Church Congress held in Manchester, the Rev. George Venables, incumbent of Friezland, in an excellent practical paper, pointed out some of the chief hindrances to successful parochial ministrations. They were : The non-residence of the clergy in many town parishes, the need of lay-helpers, of school-

chapels or mission rooms, and the modification of existing services.

At that period (1863) there was scarcely a parsonage house within that densely peopled quarter of the city of Manchester which extends from Ardwick to Cheetham, north of Market Street and London Road, containing 150,000 souls or more. A few years ago I was present at a meeting convened to consider the deficiency of parsonage houses within the boroughs of Manchester and Salford.

The following summary was then submitted :

	Parsonages.	No Parsonage.	Parishes in the Boroughs.
Rural Deanery, Cheetham.	8	1	9
„ Hulme ...	9	6	15
„ Ardwick...	1	2	3
„ Cathedral .	2	21	23
„ Salford ...	6	9	15
	<hr/> 26	<hr/> 39	<hr/> 65

The present provision is as follows :—

	Parsonages	No Parsonage.	Parishes in the Boroughs.
Rural Deanery, Cheetham.	10	0	10
„ Hulme ...	9	6	15
„ Ardwick...	2	2	4
„ Cathedral .	7	16	23
„ Salford ...	9	7	16
	<hr/> 37	<hr/> 31	<hr/> 68

Is it reasonable to expect that rectors residing at the distance of a mile or more from their respective churches can each become personally acquainted with one or two thousand families? “Non-residence,” as has been well said, “is the ruin of many of our parishes.” Where this is the case in several contiguous parishes, no wonder

that the rite of baptism and the visitation as well of the sick as of the whole are so often and so lamentably neglected.

Illustrating the habitual absence from public worship, you draw attention to a group of parishes in the heart of Manchester and in the rural deanery of the Cathedral, where the ordinary attendance is reported to be not one-sixth of the capacity of the churches to accommodate a congregation.

This enumeration is, I conclude, confined to adults; for it is incredible that the school children alone do not far exceed the number stated. The group in question consists of six churches, with a population of nearly 50,000 by the census of 1871, and sittings for rather more than 5,000—not an extravagant provision of church accommodation. The ground may be unfruitful, but there is no redundancy of churches.

Until very recently this group did not contain a single parsonage house, and when the migratory character of the inhabitants and the insufficiency of the assisting staff are also considered, the deplorable results become at least more intelligible.

It would be instructive and encouraging if the dark picture which you have drawn of neglected churches and alienated households were relieved and contrasted, as it might be, by instances of populous parishes in which the ministrations of the clergy have been comparatively successful. These would furnish valuable examples and guides in the path of improvement to be adopted.

We must be prepared, not to rest satisfied with,

but at least thankfully to accept, every progressive step, however small.

In the present state of society, crowded churches will, I apprehend, always be the exception and not the rule. A very attractive musical service, or a preacher of rare eloquence or endowments, may insure large and unfailing congregations, but the ordinary type of incumbent, however zealous, discreet, and popular, can scarcely hope to exceed the limit of a fairly-filled church—two-thirds, for instance, of the nominal sittings being occupied on ordinary occasions.

The appropriation, or rather misappropriation, of seats is undoubtedly a frequent cause of neglect of church worship. If the term appropriation were limited to the true intention, "a place for everybody and everybody in his place," I do not know that a better system could be devised; but the assertion of personal ownership is monstrous, and should be resolutely denounced and prohibited. The Visitation Charge contains some admirable remarks on this topic, with which I entirely concur.

A still more flagrant abuse in regard to the appropriation of seats is said to exist in some places; whether there are any in this diocese I know not.

Seats solemnly set apart as free for ever at the consecration of a church are subsequently appropriated and rented, sometimes in lieu of others less conveniently situated, sometimes without any substituted seats.

Would not a careful investigation of the actual

arrangements as to the free sittings in the churches throughout the diocese be useful as a preliminary step towards a remedy?

For some reason, not obvious nor easily to be explained, mission chapels do not appear to be as acceptable as might be expected from the general public approval of their scope and design. Certainly the Mission Room Fund of our Diocesan Church Building Society does not prosper, and the Incorporated Church Building Society has raised throughout the country in a period exceeding twenty years less than £10,000 for its Mission Buildings Fund.

The number of licensed buildings in this diocese is undoubtedly large (about 140), but for the most part they are schools only occasionally used for divine service in which the parochial clergy officiate according to convenience. This system, I hold, is not likely to be generally successful in establishing permanent congregations.

It seems almost essential that the curate in charge of a mission room should be as independent and unfettered as possible, and so better able to win the confidence and affections of the inhabitants of an assigned district.

The transfer of national schools to School Boards has an obvious tendency to relax the ties between the incumbent and his parishioners. It is gratifying to observe your advice that not a single Church school should be given up that can be efficiently maintained.

Lay helpers: Probably few persons are aware of the necessary numerical strength of the staff

in a large town parish, when the organisation is fairly effective.

I have a case before me in which the persons engaged in parochial work exceed one hundred and eighty. They include Sunday and day school teachers, choir, district visitors, and several officials, secretaries and so forth, having charge of various institutions and agencies under the guidance and authority of the rector, curate, churchwardens, &c.

CHURCH.		MISSION ROOM.		GENERAL.
Clergy .....	2	Lay Reader .....	1	{ Lay Representa- tives & Guilds 10
Licensed Reader ...	1	Visitor and Sides- men .....	3	{ Improvement Class Teachers 3
Wardens & Sidesmen	4	Organist and Choir	20	{ Secretaries, &c.) of Clothing Club, Penny Bank, Mthrs' Meeting.....
Organist and Choir	44	Day School Staff ...	2	
Managers and Day School Staff.....	29	Sunday School Staff	9	27
Sunday School Staff	41	District Visitors ...	3	38
District Visitors ...	12			133
	133		38	198
Deduct persons serving in two offices				14
				184

The number appears to be by no means excessive; indeed, the district visitors might, in this case, be largely increased with advantage to the parish. The organisation of a parish is no mere formality or matter of routine; it implies a combination for religious and secular objects for the benefit of the inhabitants, in which they are themselves active and conspicuous agents.

The Parish Church—which ought to be as acces-

sible as any place of public resort, and provided with frequent services both on Sundays and on weekdays—should be regarded, if I may so express myself, as a sacred fortress, the centre of the affections of all these church workers, and through them of the multitudes who directly or indirectly come under their influence.

Many church buildings, I fear, justly deserve the epithet dreary; but this blemish might be remedied at small expense, and without incurring any merited reproach of extravagant decoration or ritualistic tendencies. Indeed, their present condition is sometimes open to severe condemnation, as though the House of God did not receive the reverential care which it claims at our hands.

At the present time, almost every rector in a town parish, conscientiously desirous of doing his duty, finds a charge imposed upon him which often over-taxes his physical and mental powers in the most vigorous period of manhood. What must be the effect in the decline of life, in the case of prolonged sickness, or of a delicate constitution?

It should be remembered that upon him usually devolves the duty of making provision for many essential objects which are more properly within the functions of churchwardens and other lay helpers. Not the least anxious and burthensome of these is the collection of funds for current and extraordinary expenditure.

One of my friends, whose sphere of labour is by no means among the least eligible, writes to

me as follows:—"To work these town parishes makes a man old before middle age, that is, if he does work his parish." Again, "I often think if I could make both ends meet it would take five years from my age, or even more."

Whether the provision of one hundred additional curates with stipends of £200 per annum each would be the most effective means for reclaiming the lost sheep, for winning the alienated households, is a grave and difficult question.

I do not understand, and the Charge is silent upon the point, whether it is proposed that these men should be specially trained and qualified, after careful selection, as missionaries, or as organisers of parochial institutions, or merely as clerical helpers.

The number seems large, but it is not larger, I apprehend, than might easily be absorbed in the enormous and rapidly-augmenting population of the diocese during the next decade without any very perceptible increase of the ecclesiastic staff.

Let us not, however, leave out of consideration the consequence of disturbing the relative proportions of beneficed and unbeneficed clergy in the diocese, if the number of the former remains stationary. Would there be reasonable prospects of preferment; would not "the flow of promotion" be grievously arrested?

The Bishop of Manchester's Fund has been in operation for the last nine years in the direction which, as I understand, you desire to pursue with more vigour. It provides about one moiety of

the stipends for from fifty to sixty curates, besides lay agents, &c., in Manchester and Salford alone. Perhaps it is desirable to reorganise the fund, partly in order to raise its resources to a level with its responsibilities, and partly to infuse more energetic vitality into its proceedings.

The opportunity might then be taken to adopt your suggestion of similar funds in other great towns of the diocese, and in this way the desired provision of one hundred additional clergymen might gradually be secured without a new organisation.

I must now plead for encouragement, or at least the withdrawal of discouragement, to those who desire to promote the erection of churches. The sentiment expressed at the recent Conference in Blackburn, and repeated in the Charge, showing that you are disposed to stay your hand as regards church building, and presumably, indeed obviously, that you recommend the same course to others, naturally caused surprise.

It is true that an exception is admitted in cases where, "owing to special causes, further church accommodation is needed."

This qualification did not reach my ear at Blackburn, but it is evident that some qualification of a proposition so broad and sweeping must be understood. The question is, how far does the exception extend? It may be construed to cover all that reasonable persons can desire; for who would propose to build a church unless further accommodation was needed? And "special circumstances" is an elastic phrase which all

who are in earnest will find applicable to the particular project which they desire to promote.

The context, however, shows that the suggestion is practically to suspend the erection of churches for several years, and to assign the sum of half a million sterling, assumed to be thus disposable during the next decade, to the foundation of one hundred curacies, yielding stipends of £200 per annum. For £500,000 at 4 per cent would equal £20,000 a year—the amount required for one hundred stipends at £200.

If the funds available for church work were so limited that whatever is devoted to building must diminish the means of maintenance, there would be much force in the suggestion to stay the hand as regards church building.

As a matter of fact, however, the £500,000 so spent in the last decade is but a poor pittance compared with the resources of the diocese.

Perhaps not a year has passed during that period in which some wealthy man has not died, leaving an estate equivalent to the whole aggregate of this ten years' expenditure to which we are apt to point complacently, as if it were creditable, and even munificent.

It will be easy to arrest the flow of contributions now directed in moderate measure to church building, for counsel to that effect is always popular, and the authority of the Bishop will be regarded and repeated with the utmost deference; but to divert these prospective contributions, or any substantial proportion of them, to a "Clergy

Maintenance" or "Curates' Endowment Fund" would indeed be an arduous task.

I admit and regret that the building of churches has hitherto been conducted in a desultory fashion, for I cannot call it a system. Even the responsibility of indicating the needs of neglected or increasingly populous districts seems to devolve upon no recognised authority, whilst the expansion of suburbs or villages into towns proceeds with unabating rapidity.

The census to be taken next year will probably show an addition of a quarter of a million souls to the diocese, and it is doubtful whether the ratio of church sittings to population then disclosed will mark any improvement upon the preceding census.\*

As the object of that part of your Charge with which I venture to deal is to induce a larger attendance of worshippers at divine service, it may be useful to consider the action of those engaged in secular pursuits under similar circumstances.

Men do not wait till all existing houses are occupied, or ships freighted, but continue to build prospectively, and upon this foresight and activity our national progress greatly depends. Nonconformists also, especially perhaps the Wesleyans, seem to pursue the same energetic course; and shall the Church be contented to fall into the rear—shall conspicuous instances of neglected

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\* Population of the Diocese :—

Census 1861.

1,666,565.

Census 1871.

1,893,542.

Increase in ten years.

226,977.

churches be permitted to paralyse our future action in building? Facilities for access in regard to place and time are no unimportant agencies in promoting attendance at church, and your own practice in confirmations proves the value which you attach to such facilities.

As to the urgent need for efforts more vigorous, better organised, and more sustained in order to quicken religious life, all who are not infected with the popular scepticism of the age must heartily agree with you.

You observe in the Charge :—

“It would seem that the number of professing atheists or unbelievers in this, the lower stratum of society, is small. I mean the number of those who have organised or reasoned out their unbelief; but the proportion of those who are living in a state of religious apathy and indifferentism, not less perilous to the soul perhaps than atheism itself, is vast indeed.”

To these impressive words I subjoin an extract from the last number of the *Edinburgh Review*, which will not be regarded as an organ of bigotry :—

The land which was the cradle of the Reformation has become the grave of the Reformed Faith. . . .

Where there is indifference to religion itself, where State and people are in no respect so agreed as in the negation of all creeds, dissent even can have no vitality.

All comparatively recent works on Germany, as well as all personal observation, tell the same tale.

Denial of every tenet of the Protestant faith among the thinking classes, and indifference in the masses, are the positive and negative agencies beneath which the Church of Luther and Melancthon has succumbed.

Is there no danger that this startling picture of Germany may within a short period become true of England?

Mutato nomine de te  
Fabula narratur.

May it be yet possible, by God's grace, to apply the warning and to redeem the time.

I am,

My dear Lord Bishop,

Yours sincerely,

HUGH BIRLEY.









